

A QUEST OF IDENTITY IN RAMABAI ESPINET'S '*THE SWINGING BRIDGE*'

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ABSTRACT

Ramabai Espinet is a prominent Indo-Trinidadian author who has made critical contributions to the field of Indo-Caribbean Literature through a multiplicity of genres. She explores the themes like; immigration, gender marginality, domestic abuse, indenture, social invisibility, as well as patriarchal inviolability in Indo-Caribbean communities through the female immigrants, girls, sex workers widows and indentured laborers. Much of her writing is from the perspectives of culturally displaced women striving to obtain a balance. Focusing chiefly on issues of the influence of European empire on identity in Caribbean communities, Espinet's work reflects her activist stance as a strong advocate for multiculturalism. *The Swinging Bridge* is a moving story of race and displacement, a story that carries us effortlessly from nineteenth-century India, with its cast-out Brahmin widows, to the cane fields of Trinidad, where impoverished Indians become indentured laborers, to the optimism of the twentieth century, when the island sheds its colonial past and reimagines itself as a new homeland for many cultures. But by the 1960s, racial politics, and the promise of economic security draw Mona's family to North America, where they discover a new continent with old problems.

KEYWORDS: Ramabai Espinet, Identity, Migration, Indentureship, Homeland

INTRODUCTION

Ramabai Espinet is a writer, a professor, a poet, a dramatist, and most recently a novelist, with the release of her debut novel, *The Swinging Bridge* in 2003. Espinet was born into an Indian family in Trinidad and migrated to Canada over twenty-five years ago. Espinet's life in Canada mirrors many of the issues that the protagonist in her novel faces, issue of Caribbean culture, community relations, writing, activism and the search for lost histories. Her novel was long-listed for the 2005 IMPAC Dublin Award and short-listed for the regional Commonwealth Writers' Prize. *The Swinging Bridge* is a magnificent piece of writing. The novel represents for its narrator a journey of reclamation and redefinition of her ancestral identity. In particular, *The Swinging Bridge* travels into hitherto little-charted waters to depict the vital but unsung role of women in this society. This is an expedition that Mona, a "nowarian" by choice in her childhood games, has always resisted, not wishing to be strangled by the disenfranchising constraints and conventions of her patriarchal Indian and Presbyterian community.

THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY

When we think of the term 'identity' we use it to describe a person's composition and expression of his/her individuality or group affiliations. The term comes from the French word 'identité' and it also relates the Latin noun *identitas*, -tatis which means 'the same'. It is defined as follows:

“The distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group.”¹

The word identity has two different meanings. First, it stands for the collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a person is recognized, the individuality, which is just your own. The second is the quality or condition of being the same as something else, which means to have an identity, in every aspect of a being, there must be at least one person or thing with that attribute. So the term is essentially comparative in nature as it emphasizes the sharing of degree of sameness with others in an area.

A QUEST OF IDENTITY IN *THE SWINGING BRIDGE*

The Swinging Bridge is a story about the immigrated families. Mona Singh is main protagonist of the novel. Her family migrated from India to Trinidad to Canada. In Canada Mona live in Montreal because she won a scholarship and working as a researcher for films Canadiana. Her older brother Kello has been diagnosed with lymphoma and because of that he has been deathly ill. Whole family come together to comfort him. Kello is very clever businessman and he wants buy back his lost land from the moneylenders. Kello insists Mona to go Trinidad and behalf of him buy back the land as well as confirm the transaction. Mona cannot refuse his request and move to Trinidad. Thorough this journey she reveals many secrets of her family as well as she discover her own identity also. She comes to know that her great grandmother Gainder had been indentured servant from India to Trinidad. Thorough Gainder's document she knows that Gainder was a beautiful poet. She found some songs and poems about the pain of indentureship. She now relates herself to the Caribbean, Canada as well as the India as follows:

"I was an Indian, an Indian from the Caribbean, an Indian long out of India, for generations now" (188)

Mona is now thinking about her own identity and this is a central theme of the *The Swinging Bridge*. She thought that now she has an Indian belonging but at same time she cannot refuses her Caribbean belonging. She is struggling to question that who is she exactly? Is she is a South Asian in Canada? Or she is a Caribbean? Or she is an Indian? She has a twice migrant. Mona and her family is only one representative family of those families who are migrated all over the world. After the Kello's death Mona's prime responsibility to take back their land and with that know more about her identity. Ramabai Espinet has explored the current issue of identity thorough this novel.

Mona has live in Caribbean and Trinidadian society and because of that she relates herself to the Caribbean and Trinidadian identities. She is very much upset from the South Asian identity but even though she tried know more about Indian identity. She thinks that her Indian identity helps her to shape strong Caribbean and Trinidadian identity. The major source for Indian identity was the great grandmother's history and her stories. In this novel, we see that in Canada the South Asian identity has been very much neglected. Da-Da, Mona's father has highly influenced by Creole and the Western cultures from Trinidad but his style has neglected in Canadian society. It shows from their language also. When Mona and their family speaking about their own identities and the experiences they use the word Indians but speaking about the Canada they use the word South Asian. Thus with the Da-Da's style his family's history and struggles of migration and experience in India, Trinidad, and Canada is also neglected.

¹ Rummens, J. *Personal Identity and Social Structure in SintMaartin/Saint Martin: Plural Identities Approach*. Unpublished Thesis/Dissertation: York University, 1993. "Identity (social science) - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia." *Self-identification* N.P., n.d. Web. 26 Feb 2014.

Mona always tries to homogenize her and her family into the one identity that is Canadian but other family members resist it. It shows thorough the Da-Da and Uncle Tristram's behavior and language. They often choose the different forms of English according to the situation. They relate themselves to the particular identity in particular environment. They search their identity in this landscape with the different experiments.

The Swinging Bridge is a perfect example of the homeland. Gainder's secret leads Mona towards the searching of her own identity as well as the homeland. In this novel, Gainder's crossing of the kala pani is a moment of shock to the Mona. She is now reimagining her homeland and recreated the Diaspora. This indentureship gives much sorrow and pain to the Gainder. Through her songs we come to know that her love Jeevan is left behind as her homeland. This loss of love is seen in her songs. Through the Gainder's song Mona also connected to the India and try to recreating the identities of her families with belonging to Trinidad. The construction of *jahaji* brotherhoods on the ships is symbolic of the letting go of a family in India in order to create new bonds of kin in Trinidad. The shedding of caste and the reinvention of mostly casteless Hindu societies in Trinidad is also symbolic of how India has been reinvented in Trinidad.

The title of the novel shows the deeply distressing experience of Mona and her family. The Swinging Bridge is also referring to the uncertainty of Mona's identity. She relates herself to the swinging bridge of her past and present life as follows:

"indeterminate timelines in which the past mediates a future-inspired present in the form of multiple diasporic dislocations and exilic relocations" (25).

Symbolically, the swinging up of the bridge symbolizes the departure from India and the swing down symbolizes the back in memory, as with Mona's search for Gainder's past.

In the memory of Gainder Mona is return to the India. Mentally she returns to Indian identity. Many scholars said that it is a mythical process as follows:

A return to India in the lives of indentured people and their descendants can only be a mythical one that is inscribed in the contracts of indentureship. But, for the most part, it is a return that is never realized (Puri 171).

This mythical return is especially distinguishable between the old and new Indian Diasporas when they come together in Canada, where return in a physical sense is possible and conceivable for direct migrants (Bhachu 164).

Return to India is a mythical process because crossing the kala pani means there is no link to India for the twice migrant peoples. When Da-Da and Mona's Uncle Peter try to reunite with their Indian identity they are not succeed. Through this novel Ramabai Espinet explores that quest for identity is not an easy task. Return to our own identity is very difficult. Da-Da and Mona's Uncle Peter are very much disappointed when they realize that their cousins from India has no much interest for reunite which explains as follows:

"no invitation to return ... nor did they ask to see his children. They were satisfied. The circle has been closed" (91).

So, the return to India is a very much difficult process by physically. In fact it is remain only in the mind of the migrated people. In this novel writing style also explores the question of identity. The stories of Gainder and her experiences from India are written in italics. It shows that, ambiguity of this belonging to Mona's identity. The italic words represent the Indian identity. It also shows that though for Gainder is not easy to convey the Indian identity but she creates

different identity on the island of Trinidad with the combination of India and Africa.

Migration is always done for the better life and creates a new identity. Gainder was a widow in an India. She migrated towards Trinidad for better life and creates a new identity. Mona's quest for a better life is continue and she migrated to Canada and creates a new identity. She is now moves again to Trinidad for acquiring the family land. So, it is very strange that migration gives better life as well as many identities. A person is always swinging in between those identities. It is difficult to belonging to one country and one identity. Mona decided that it is not need to live now in Trinidad but it is need to be in the Canada:

"I am part of this city I live in, and right now I want no other have I bring my own beat to the land around me" (305).

At the end of the novel she finalizes that she has to be live in Canada for better future. She has understands that she not recognize with the India but she has an identity with the Caribbean. She now confirms the Caribbean identity out of the Indian and African routes. Mona has now many homes, many identities and many possibilities for belonging as India, Trinidad and Canada.

CONCLUSIONS

A quest of identity is major theme of Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge*. It deals with the problems and the experiences of migrated peoples of Canada. Espinet is very beautifully explained the ambiguity of identities and question of homeland through the Mona Singh and her family. The twice migrated family and their struggle for their identity is a central issue of the novel *The Swinging Bridge*. This family is a representative of people who are migrated all over world. Globalization leads the migration but unknowingly it leads towards the question of identity of people. Immigrant are coming to Canada or Trinidad for made their identity in fixed homeland but through this novel we come to known that they people are always struggle with their identity in society as well as in mind also. The migration experiences of Mona Singh and her family from India to the Caribbean and then to Canada leads them towards the very serious challenges to the problematic notions of identity, belonging and imaginations of homeland, and contest traditional understandings of Diaspora. Mona Singh is main protagonist in this novel. She is moving one place to another place. While moving her and her family belonging to the many countries and simultaneously they are struggling with the trying to balance the ideas of identity and home. Through this important theme of identity Ramabai Espinet explores unique identity construction of twice migrant subjects. *The Swinging Bridge* is a perfect example of the Caribbean society which reflects through the themes like question of identity, migration and indentureship. Espinet has massively illustrates the quest of identity of Mona Singh and her family in *The Swinging Bridge*.

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